

## **Deader than a Triton Moon**

By Jason Fry

*Solo gripped the tauntaun's hide, his numbed fingers searching for even the slightest indication of life. "Deader than a Triton moon," he said, knowing Luke did not hear a word. "We haven't got much time." -- The Empire Strikes Back (novelization).*

The *One Two Many* was three hours out of Injopan and bearing down on the Maw when the ship's boy burst into the lounge with his latest discovery. It was a book -- a book full of mysterious verses, and some big bug in Injopan High Port had just *handed* it to him.

Five of the six Corellians in the *One Two Many's* lounge immediately turned away from Janzel Helot and his find -- they'd only crewed half a Kessel Run with this particular ship's boy, and his breathless discoveries and questions could already have filled the bulk freighter's holds to overflowing. But Shandy Fanaso spared what was clamped in Janzel's fist a glance -- a glance that immediately became a glower.

"You dimwitted barve, that's not a book -- that's a *tract*," he growled, taking the flimsi pages out of the boy's hand and gazing at the blotchy printing in disgust. "A tract of Gactimus. Kid, you keep taking things bugs hand out in spaceports and you'll wake up in a cage on Trandosha."

"You mean you know what this is, Mr. Fanaso?" Janzel asked, wide-eyed, paging through the tract that the smuggler handed back to him. "Listen, it's the weirdest thing -- '*Thus transitioned Gactimus....*' "

Fanaso waved him silent and shut his eyes for a moment. Then he began to speak:

*"Thus transitioned Gactimus,  
Whose mind embraced clarity,  
Where once his feet had embraced toil.  
Quiet were his mindly manifestations,  
Silent was his contented soul."*

"That's right!" interjected Janzel, who'd been reading along in fascination and was now running his finger down the next page. "What does it mean? It's amazing."

"It's *bilge*," Fanaso said. "And it doesn't mean anything. What in the name of the Emperor's black bones are 'mindly manifestations?' How do feet embrace something? And it actually gets worse -- the rest of it's like reading a recipe for Kubaz stew. I told those bugs they needed to hire a real translator if they wanted anyone to actually *adopt* their faith, but of course they didn't listen."

"Mr. Fanaso?" Janzel looked shocked. "You're a... a follower of this Gactimus?"

That drew braying laughter from the smugglers, who'd been snickering and elbowing each other since the moment Fanaso snatched the tract away from Janzel.

"Shandy's practically the high priest," said Devoris, one of the load tenders. "Go on, Shandy. Tell the kid how you became the grand high poobah of the bugs. Might teach him a thing or two."

Fanaso's eyes flickered from his now-grinning shipmates to the hypnotized ship's boy and the tract in his hand, then down at the pitted durasteel deck of the *One Two Many*.

"All right, kid." He sighed. "It started when I was young and stupid like you, and found myself on one of the Triton moons...."

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Shandy Fanaso killed the light hauler *Corellian Gambit's* engines and unlimbered its triangle of landing gear the moment he felt the faint shiver of the patrol cruiser's tractor beams locking onto his craft. The planet Triton was a brilliant yellow half-circle out his viewport, attended by a trio of dull gray satellites. A yawning Fanaso regarded the scene until the metal walls of the cruiser's docking bay crawled down over the transparisteel and hid the view. A moment later the *Corellian Gambit* settled to the deck with a thump and Fanaso headed aft, rubbing his eyes.

The Imperial officer who ascended the gangplank was checking his datapad as he came; he gave Fanaso a cursory once-over before looking back down at the data his unit was receiving from the *Corellian Gambit's*

navicomputer. "Fanaso, huh? Lieutenant Gallagane. Checking in at Triton en route to the Pangarees, right? Any additional cargo not on the manifest?"

"Nope. Replacement arms for agri-droids, couple of freezers full of brualiki, a few courier orders placed by Eriadu Pay-and-Fetch."

"That your port of origin, Eriadu? Forgot to file that on your flight plan, Fanaso."

"I did? Sorry! Oversight, sir."

Gallagane glanced up from the pad at Fanaso. "Don't worry about it, kid -- I'll just change it and back-date it. This your first time in-system?"

"Yes, sir."

"Bring any holos with you? It's a long wait, you know."

"Sir? No sir. I've got no holos, sir."

Gallagane's datapad beeped; he clipped it back onto his belt and peered at Fanaso. "You're cleared for a berth at Triton Besh -- your navicomputer has the vector. Customs tax will be added to your tithe. You realize there's four days' processing time for a tithe receipt, don't you, Fanaso? No? Well, now you do. Next time I see you inbound, I guarantee you'll have a few holos. They don't say 'deader than a Triton moon' for nothing, you know."

Fanaso scrubbed a hand through his lank black hair and grinned at Gallagane. The older man didn't seem like a bad sort for an Imp -- he could have fined him for the missing information on the flight plan. "Sir, long as they've got a cantina, I'm good for four days or 40. Know what I mean, sir?"

The corners of Gallagane's mouth twitched upward.

"They've got a cantina, Fanaso. Next time I see you, you tell me how you liked it. And do yourself a favor, kid: When you touch down, your bug will hand you the Rules of Law for the Domains of Triton. It might seem like silly stuff, but there are a few dinkos in all those details. So read carefully, got that? Clear skies."

"Clear skies, sir," Fanaso said. He was still wondering what Gallagane had meant about the Rules of Law when the *Corellian Gambit* cleared the cruiser's bay and he kicked in the sublights, handing the controls over to the navicomputer for the approach to Triton.

The funny thing was he wasn't originally supposed to be within 100 light years of Triton. He'd been headed farther rimward along the Rimma Trade Route, contracted to haul a hold of chak-root liqueur to the back end of the Minos Cluster, but his cargo had never arrived -- he was cooling his heels at Eriadu when word came that the incoming hauler had a burnout a day out of Sukkult. So he'd worked the general-cargo area of the port and picked up a few loads for shipment to the Pangarees, with the promise of a few more coming back the other way. Eleven days' travel in all -- a lot faster going in through Triton, the general-hire agent had told him around his cigarra. So Triton it was.

A hooting klaxon told him he was on final approach to Triton Besh -- he glanced out the viewport, watched the dingy gray moon grow nearer. Any details of its surface were lost against the brilliant glow of Triton, whose windswept deserts blasted reflected sunlight back out into space. As Fanaso watched, his navicomputer painted a green cross on the viewport. Eventually the cross bracketed a featureless rectangle of pounded duracrete, one of many connected by white snaking lines of pressurized prefab corridors that met up here and there with the blisters of atmosphere domes. The *Corellian Gambit* touched down with a jitter of retrorockets. At the lock, Fanaso put his eye to the port, watched the flexible white arm of an umbilical corridor extend itself from the port and feel for his outer hatch. The lock indicator glowed green and he thumbed the hatch open.

Fanaso tramped the 12-meter length of the umbilical impatiently. A bug waited at the end, just beyond the flexible walls in the corridor of Triton Besh Port proper. The bug was more than two meters of glistening yellowish chitin, standing on two fibrous zig-zag legs. More spiny limbs -- far too many of them for Fanaso's taste -- emerged from a seam on its mailed belly, twitching and rotating. Its head was a wedge of ivory bisected by a deep central notch; inside were gleams and flurries of movement that Fanaso found vaguely nauseating. A simple canvas carryall looped around the bug's head and hung halfway down its thorax. An alarming clicking and rasping began somewhere beneath the chitin. A translator Fanaso couldn't see squealed to life, the words a grating drone.

"Vv. Fanaso, in the tradition of Gactimus you are bade earnest welcome to the threshold of the Domains of Triton," the bug said, the speech accompanied by twitchings of the multi-jointed limbs. One limb dipped into the carryall and emerged with a thick sheaf of foolscap. "Please accept the kindly embrace of the Rules of Law. As a courtesy you are to be informed that 14 changes have been codified in the preceding nine standard sidereal timeparts, pursuant to branches...."

Fanaso took the papers gingerly and thumbed through them as the bug rattled and clanked on. He tried a page at random and blinked in dismay: It was a discussion, rendered in some kind of pidgin Basic, of the urgency of maintaining a hatch seal between the umbilical and the ship's lock -- something any ship's boy learned in his first hour above the atmosphere. Fanaso flipped to another section and found a lecture about the perils of harboring poisonous vermin.

"If this is the advanced spacer's manual, I'd hate to see the basic," Fanaso said with a grin, thrusting the hundreds of pages back at the armored chest. The bug paused in its recitation of new codifications and swiveled its head in a manner that would have broken Fanaso's neck instantly.

"Are you in possession of manifest? Are you wishing to arrange cargo tithe presently?" it asked, a collection of smaller limbs waving in what Fanaso eventually decided was a refusal to take back the Rules of Law.

Fanaso tossed the papers back into the umbilical and patted his datapad. "Cargo tithe? Now you're talking -- let's make tracks."

He took a step forward, into the corridor, then jumped back with a cry of surprise -- the bug had moved with uncanny speed, whipping a tertiary limb into its bag and thrusting something new at his chest.

"Apologies for any startlement," it said. "Now that you have performed liminal transition from the umbilical you are formally occupying the Domains of Triton. Thus you are eligible to receive joyous instruction in the tenets of Gactimus."

The new thing thrust at him, Fanaso saw, was a sloppily bound collection of a dozen or so pages. Puzzled, he peered at the first line:

*Thus transitioned Gactimus...*

"No thanks, friend. I'm a little late for saving," Fanaso said. "Now where do I fork over this cargo tithe of yours?"

"There will be pleasure in guiding you," the bug said, letting several more legs swing down to the dingy floor but leaving Fanaso clutching the tract. "And during the journey there will be pleasure in instructing you in the verses of Gactimus and leading you to edification...."

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Fanaso couldn't tell how far away the cargo-tithe office was, exactly, but it had to be several kilometers. The bug -- its name was something like Mactimentus, or at least it didn't correct Fanaso when he called it that -- continued clattering away about Gactimus the entire way, about his contented soul and the mental embrace of clarity and a bunch of other stuff that Fanaso tried his best to shut out. The corridors were dotted with other umbilicals connected to other ships; now and again Fanaso and his companion passed other sour-faced spacers -- humans, Twi'leks, Houks and members of species Fanaso had never seen before, each of them attended by a chattering bug. Only one thing got Fanaso through the trip -- the sight of a broad passageway into a dim atmospheric dome, outside of which a cluster of bugs waited silently. Fanaso peered into the dome's gloom and saw spacers hunched over a long low counter. A cantina -- definitely a cantina.

"Hey, Mac, time out," Fanaso said, putting his hands together in a shockball referee's signal. "The cargo-tithe can wait while we stop in for a frosty Elba or two, can't it?"

Mactimentus' limbs fluttered with some indefinable emotion. "The Rules of Law do not consider the cantina part of the Domains of Triton," it clattered. "Under the embrace of the Law your sojourn there must be unaccompanied."

"That is a shame," Fanaso said. "So that's why all you fellas are waiting in the hall. Well, I'll just be a minute -- "

"However," Mactimentus grated, "only scrip of the Domains of Triton is transferable for cantina goods and services. Scrip of the Domains of Triton can only be obtained -- "

"Let me guess -- at the cargo-tithe office," Fanaso muttered, then shrugged. "Ah well. You know what they say: You can't see Kuat until you've seen Horthav. Lead on."

"There will be pleasure in doing so. As Gactimus intoned during the Episode of the Peregrinating Pilgrims...."

Fanaso offered the cantina a gloomy parting glance and trudged along beside his bug. Mactimentus spent their hour in line at the tithing office doing what all the other spacers' bugs had been doing -- reciting the 20 verses of the tract he'd given Fanaso and trying to get the spacer to recite them with him. Fanaso demurred with decreasing politeness, thinking instead of Elba beer and whether the juke would have a holo of D'iaist Kloo Army burning through *Stardance*. Finally he reached the head of the line and paid over his cargo-tithe and customs tax to a bug with a piebald yellow-and-brown shell.

"Receipt shall be delivered to your umbilical by your monitor in four days," the bug intoned. "This receipt will be collected at the hyperspace jump point to the Pangarees and a legal passage recorded."

By the time they got to the cantina Fanaso was feeling somewhat cross: Mactimentus's ceaseless rattling was giving him a headache, and he'd heard the first few verses of Gactimus so many times that he was pretty sure he could have recited them himself. Leaving Mactimentus in the corridor, Fanaso eased himself gratefully onto a stool halfway down the counter.

"Elba beer, a frosty one," he said.

Instantly he was surrounded by laughter. Even the bartender, a surly blank-faced man, was guffawing.

"Ain't no Elba here, you nerf pup," a one-eyed, jowly spacer at his left elbow said.

"OK then, I'll take a Treffanian ale -- "

"No intoxicants of any kind," the bartender said above the laughter. "Not even coffeine, on account of it's a stimulant. Just canned juice and distilled water. Take your pick."

"Are you kidding me?"

"Rules of Law, section 43-4, kid," the bartender said. "Possession of intoxicants and stimulants is proscribed within the Domains of Triton. That's the short version -- it takes the bugs pages to say the simplest thing."

Fanaso looked around the cantina. "Gimme some quarter-cred chits, then. I hope you've got a little D'iaist Kloo on that pathetic-looking juke over there."

"Juke's broken. And if it weren't, you wouldn't hear nothing but verses of Gactimus. In fact, kid, that's why it's broken. And why it'll get broken again a couple of minutes after the bugs order me to fix it."

"No music?"

"Section 44-2. Music is considered a stimulant by the Domains."

"You got tabletop sabacc? Pack of elanthie cards? *Pair of dice*?"

"Section 46-9...."

"Oh, forget it."

Fanaso put his head in his hands for a long moment. When he looked up, the one-eyed spacer was morosely sipping his distilled water and the bartender was flicking at hypothetical dust motes with a rag.

"If there's no booze, cards or tunes, what in the name of Bartolp's Last Bounce are you all doing here?" Fanaso demanded.

"You know why everyone's bugs are waiting outside?" the bartender asked. "Because the corridors are considered part of the Domains of Triton. The only exceptions are this cantina, the 'freshers, your ships and the umbilicals. That means the bugs can't go any of those places, can't give you tracts, can't babble on about kriffing Gactimus. Anywhere else, you're fair game."

"But there's no booze, no music, no nothing. Why even leave your ship?"

"Got a jet-juice problem I'm trying to kick," the old spacer at Fanaso's elbow said. "Unless you can afford the rest cure on Ottabesk, this is the best place in the galaxy to get clean."

"Myself, I've been dry for six standard years and forty-four days," the bartender asked. "Got a cooler of your Elba beer back on your ship, kid?"

Fanaso shook his head forlornly.

"Didn't think so. You'll be back too, then."

"Wait a minute. If this isn't part of the Domains, the Rules of Law don't apply, right?"

"Right. No bugs, no preaching."

"So how is this place any different from a dive on the Smuggler's Moon?" Fanaso asked. "What's stopping you from having Twi'lek girls pour Elba into your mouths while they play a little acoustic Ommni box?"

"Well, besides the indecency laws -- that's section 53-2 -- the operative word is possession. I could bring in the kegs no problem, but the second I rolled them out of my umbilical I'd be in violation of the Rules of Law and have to pay an Emperor's ransom in tithes -- or offer devotion-service, which is worse. Right, Kiardi?"

"Right, Saman. It used to be worse, kid," the jowly spacer said around his distilled water. "Ten years ago the bugs tried to say that intoxicants in your belly counted as possession. If you stepped off your ship and weren't sober as a Jedi, you were taking a big risk. Once they made me pay tithe for humming."

"So what happened?"

"Traffic dried up," Saman said. "Only other way into the Pangarees is up the Rimma all the way to Corlaasi, then along the Dravin Cut to the Chundu Shunt -- "

"That's a hike," Fanaso said with a low whistle.

"Sure is," Kiardi said. "Five extra days, even considering the wait for the tithe receipts. But everyone was willing to hoof it once the bugs started breath-testing in the corridors. Nowadays, there's a balance. They get their tithes and a few days to try to edify us, we save a little time and get distilled water and juice."

Kiardi toasted Saman, who nodded back. Fanaso glowered out into the corridor where Mactimentus stood -- at least he thought it was Mactimentus. It would be a long four days, he thought.

Then he had an idea.

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Lieutenant Gallagane glanced at his datapad, then looked again, brow furrowed.

"Your manifest's glitched, kid," he said. "And so's your flight plan -- again. Says here your destination is Triton and you're carrying nothing for transshipment."

"No glitch, sir," Fanaso said, grinning hugely where he stood at the foot of the *Corellian Gambit's* gangplank. "Come up and see."

Standing in the hold, Gallagane regarded the kegs of Elba beer, Treffanian ale, jumbli juice, the mixers, the fizz cartridges. He eyed the jukebox, complete with three versions of *Stardance*. He frowned at the bored Twi'lek girl smoking a cigarra -- actually, Fanaso had to admit, there were a few too many years on those lekku for "girl" to really be the best term -- where she sat on the boxes of heff-nuts. He cocked his head at the brilliant red banner reading "Shandy's Place -- Leave Your Tracts at the Door."

"Fanaso, the Rules of Law -- "

"The Rules of Law don't apply until you set foot outside of the umbilical and enter the Domains of Triton, sir," Fanaso said. "And I'm not doing that. Not one keg, not one recording, not one lekku-ribbon is leaving the *Corellian Gambit*. So the bugs can take the Rules of Law and their tracts of Gactimus and use them for their egg-nests, for all it matters to me. Right, sir?"

"Except for the fact, Fanaso, that the umbilical and your ship are considered Imperial space, and so -- "

"And so that I need this, sir," Fanaso said, pointing to a framed document he'd bolted to the bulkhead. "A cabaret license. Good for celestial bodies, space stations and starships in Mayagil sector within 15 light years of the Rimma Trade Route for one year, sir."

Gallagane took off his olive cap and scratched his head.

"Very well, Fanaso. I hope you know what you're doing."

"Oh, I do, sir. I'm going to the Triton moons to get rich -- it's going to be *wonderful*." Fanaso grinned and even winked at the Twi'lek, who shrugged and blew a trio of smoke rings.

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The bug was still waiting when Fanaso finally got everything set up in the hold and marched down the umbilical with his banner and two nodes of Stick-2-It. Its limbs twirled in an odd arpeggio of greeting, worry, religious fervor or some unknowable bug emotion.

"Vv. Fanaso, in the tradition of Gactimus you are offered a surfeit of joys in observation of your return to the threshold of the Domains of Triton...."

Fanaso looked up from trying to find a place to attach the other node of Stick-2-It and peered at the patterns on the bug's shell. "*Mactimentus*? Hey pera, how's the tract trade?"

"It is the greatest of pleasure to be your monitor on this and all subsequent sojourns in the Domains of Triton as you advance toward a full understanding of the teachings of Gactimus," Mactimentus clattered, reaching into its carryall. "Please once again accept the kindly embrace of the Rules of Law. Again as a courtesy you are to be informed that two changes have been codified in the two-thirds of a standard sidereal timepart since your last visit --"

Fanaso straightened his banner and tossed the now-familiar sheaf of papers into the umbilical. "I'll give that the once-over later, old pal. First let's get our feet embracing a little toil -- I've got an errand to run down at the cantina."

Mactimentus, who had been dipping into its carryall for a tract, hesitated in puzzlement, head wheeling from the tract to Fanaso to the banner. "There is no possession of manifest? First we must arrange cargo-tithe, is it not so?"

"It is not so. You'll see."

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The real wonder, Fanaso mused, was that no one had thought of it before. From his post behind the makeshift bar in the *Corellian Gambit's* hold, he smiled at the knots of laughing spacers and at the Twi'lek girl, cigarra thankfully discarded, doing the veil-dance to the strains of *Stardance (Rodia Remix)*. He'd made back his investment a week ago and still had enough liquor and mixers for three or four more days. In fact, he stood to make more on this one run than he would have on *three* trips to the Pangarees -- and with considerably less time and effort.

"Hey, Saman, could you take over a moment?"

Saman nodded, although he was a bit in his cups. That stirred a vague feeling of guilt somewhere in Fanaso. *Ah well*, he thought, *I didn't twist his arm*. He figured he'd better head down the umbilical to check on the bugs -- Mactimentus's behavior in particular was beginning to trouble him.

The sounds of merriment were only faintly audible at the umbilical's threshold. Outside, in the corridor, the two dozen bugs assigned to the spacers aboard the *Corellian Gambit* waited as silently as they had outside the cantina. Four other bugs with spotted armor stood around Mactimentus, gesticulating with their limbs and clattering a stream of rapid-fire gibberish. Mactimentus's chitin was dull; Fanaso might have been imagining it, but he thought the armor appeared to be flaking here and there.

Mactimentus turned to Fanaso, limbs whirring in what Fanaso was pretty sure was agitation.

"Again it is said to you -- you are the creator of an immorality. The candidates upon abandoning sojourn in your domain are obstreperous and resistant to edification. It is a situation rapidly approaching a level of intolerability. You are once again inveighed to abandon this campaign of spiritual non-enablement and carefully consider the teachings of Gactimus."

The bugs around Mactimentus assaulted it with a fusillade of sounds like dropped plates. Mactimentus's limbs hung limply from the slot in its thorax.

"Now, don't be too hard on ol' Mac," Fanaso told them. "I know you guys are steamed that I've taken your pilgrims or whatever they are, but think about it this way: Today you're getting, say, a hundred spacers a week for that walk to the cargo-tithe office. Let people know about Shandy's Place and you might get *five hundred*. That's a lot more candidates to edify, right? And like I told my pal Mactimentus here, if you'll tell me who to

chat with, I'm sure we could work out an arrangement giving the Domains some percentage of the till. If I give you, say, one percent in exchange for an exclusive deal, you won't believe how many tracts you can print. I tell you, fellas, we're sitting on a fortune here -- "

The biggest bug of the lot pushed Mactimentus aside, grating and clanking at Fanaso. Its translator whirled to life: "Heterodox alien provocateur, your mercantile schemes arouse no affinity with us. Your activities bring shame upon the egg-nest of your monitor."

The bug squealed at its fellows, who marched off in formation, leaving Mactimentus twitching in dismay.

"Cheer up, Mac," Fanaso said. "I've got an idea. Gimme some tracts -- I know you can't come into the ship, but I'll put some on the bar for people to read. Nothing like a good Elba to make the mind suggestible. And next time I'm here -- "

"Next time?" Mactimentus's translator delivered the words in the same flat monotone as always, but they sounded different. Somehow it sounded less like a question than a wail.

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This time, Gallagane had to come over on his patrol cruiser's pinnace -- *Shandy's Pleasure Palace* was too big to fit in the cruiser's docking bay. In fact, the *Whaladon*-class container ship was the biggest vessel that would fit on one of Triton Besh's duracrete pads.

"She's a rusty old scow -- took me a week to get her here -- but since she's not going anywhere else, it doesn't much matter," Fanaso said as the Imperial officer surveyed the kegs and crates stacked in the cavernous hold. Four Twi'lek girls -- this time the term most definitely applied, and none of them smoked -- could be heard rehearsing their dance steps in the forward lounge.

"You made more money than I thought," Gallagane said. "A container ship isn't cheap."

Fanaso shrugged. "I took out a loan. The interest rate's a killer, but that's business. There's a lot of money to be made, but that means a lot more entrepreneurs. I don't have a lot of time before competitors come in, so I've got to get while the getting's good."

Gallagane shook his head.

"All I'll say is this, kid: Your conduct has aroused the attention of the highest-ranking monitors in the Domains. Read the Rules of Law -- and read them carefully."

"I'll double-check my hatch seals," Fanaso said with a grin. "And I already looked for poisonous vermin."

"Remember the dinkos," Gallagane said. "Well, clear skies, Fanaso. I'm expecting an errand of my own on Triton Besh today."

"I'll have a cold Elba for you if you come by the *Pleasure Palace*," Fanaso said.

"That's a distinct possibility," Gallagane called back over his shoulder.

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When Fanaso got to the end of the umbilical there was already a crowd of spacers and bugs waiting -- in fact, a ragged cheer greeted him. He grinned and waved his new banner in reply.

"Let me get this up and we'll be officially open for business," he said.

Mactimentus thrust the Rules of Law at him without comment and Fanaso thumbed through it, looking for an index or some other way of finding out what had changed. Two of the oversized bug leaders were standing back in the crowd, holding some sort of metal rods tipped with feathery antennae. The crowd, Fanaso noted, was getting somewhat unruly as he scanned the first page of the Rules of Law. Behind him, in the depths of the *Pleasure Palace*, the music started up. He looked back and saw one of the Twi'lek girls peek through the hatch, sleek lekku twitching.

That was too much for the crowd: A spacer pushed by him, then another, then two more, then three more, then as many as could fit in the umbilical.

"Hey, you're on the honor system until I get the register open," Fanaso called out after them, looking around in hopes that Saman was nearby. The Rules of Law seemed different -- a new printing technique, maybe? Different flimsiplast?

He'd flipped through the papers once when one of the metal rods carried by the bugs began keening. Mactimentus and the bug leaders clattered at each other; then Mactimentus's translator powered up.

"Horrid meatbag," it said. "You are in violation of all 43 instances of the Rules of Law changed in the one and one-sixth standard sidereal timeparts since your last visit."

"What? Mac, why didn't you tell me? You can't just shove this stuff at me. It's -- it's discourteous, is what it is."

"No courtesy is required to be extended to such as you," Mactimentus grated, his eyes glittering somewhere beneath his armored head-shell. Fanaso began backing down the umbilical, wondering if the bugs would follow.

They didn't; instead, a familiar figure in Imperial olive shouldered his way past them.

"Lieutenant Gallagane! Thank the...." Fanaso's words died in his throat as he saw the look on Gallagane's face. Behind him came stormtroopers -- six of them. Two came to a halt beside Fanaso and Gallagane, who almost gently took the Rules of Law from Fanaso's grip. The other four stormtroopers kept marching up the umbilical and into the *Pleasure Palace*. A few moments later the music came to an abrupt halt.

"I told you the dinko was in the details," Gallagane said. "They changed the Rules on you, Fanaso. You're guilty of importing intoxicants and stimulants to the Domains of Triton -- that analyzer back there will record sufficient trace elements of Elba beer, coffeine and nondistilled juices to place you in violation of 12 statutes. The other sensor will show that music was audible in the corridor -- that's another five. And there are six recently-introduced statutes that deal solely with the display of banners visible from the Domains."

"Lieutenant, I was trying to read them -- they rushed right past me."

"I'm afraid failure to provide proper security for a gathering is also punishable under a recently codified statute."

Fanaso scrubbed at his chin, hearing the babble of angry spacers from the *Pleasure Palace*. "OK, OK. What do I do? Pay over a tithe? I can do that. Let me talk to Mac and those big bugs. We'll work something out."

"The penalties, as it happens, are also set by new statutes in the Rules, Fanaso. First off, confiscation of all proscribed substances, including their means of conveyance. That's the ship and most everything in it. It belongs to the Domains now."

"What?"

"The remaining fines aren't remittable by tithe. Only devotion-service. The hierarchs of the Domains have asked me to explain the nature of this devotion-service to you, to ensure that it is clear."

Gallagane took a small sheaf of papers from his pocket. It was a tract, Fanaso saw -- the same tract of Gactimus he'd been given the minute he set foot in Triton Besh Port.

"It seems that the Domains' statute-approved cantina has had chronic problems with its jukebox," Gallagane said. "Since the hierarchs and their acolytes cannot legally enter the cantina, there has been no way to spread the word of Gactimus to the spacers who spend time there. It is a problem that has concerned the hierarchs for some time."

Spacers began filing down the umbilical, past Fanaso, Gallagane and the stormtroopers. Some shot him looks of anger, others glances of pity. One wild-eyed spacer was using his fingers to transfer the last bubbles of Elba foam from his beard to his mouth.

"Your devotion-service shall be to recite the verses of Gactimus in the cantina, so that your fellow spacers may be enlightened," Gallagane said. "You will read for nine hours a day over three three-hour shifts, using an amplified system that will be provided by the hierarchs. You will be at liberty every sixth day, though you will be restricted to the Domains of Triton, the cantina and the 'freshers. A cot will be provided for you in a storage room adjoining the cantina, as will rations and whatever juice and distilled water you desire."

Fanaso studied the tract numbly, gazing at that first line in disbelief:

*Thus transitioned Gactimus...*



"This may sound harsh, Fanaso, but the hierarchs have agreed that your devotion-time shall be complete when you finish the initiation every candidate for junior monitor undergoes. Namely, you shall recite the saga of Gactimus's enlightenment, subject to the proper parameters of pronunciation and intonation, 500 times."

Fanaso thumbed through the tract, found he already half-knew some of the 20 verses from hearing Mactimentus chattering his way through them in the cargo-tithe office. Five hundred times was annoying, but hardly intolerable. Even if they were picky about pronunciation, he figured he could manage that over a few days, though he didn't even want to know how his throat would feel when he was done. What he would do when his backers found *Shandy's Pleasure Palace* and everything else had been seized was a bigger problem. A *much* bigger problem.

"Come on, Fanaso," Gallagane said, not unkindly, steering him by the elbow past the pair of stormtroopers. "Mactimentus will take it from here. You've got the first tract, he's got the next few. He'll bring the rest of the tracts to the cantina as you need them."

"OK, that sounds -- *what?*"

Gallagane shook his head sadly. "This is the first tract of Gactimus, kid. The one they hand to the uninitiated, with the first 20 verses of the saga."

"The *saga*? How -- how many tracts are there?"

"Three hundred and thirteen. When you've read the entire saga 500 times, you'll be free to go."

\* \* \*

Janzel Helot looked from the laughing crew of the *One Two Many* to the tract in Fanaso's hand, his mouth moving.

"And you wondered why ol' Shandy don't like to gab, kid," crowed Devoris. "Now you know why -- he's all talked-out."

"Bug got his tongue," another smuggler offered.

"Five hundred times? How long did that take you, Mr. Fanaso?"

"Tell him how long, Shandy," Devoris said.

Fanaso had done the math on his datapad, sitting in the cantina with the first tract while one of Gallagane's technicians set up the amplifier. He shut his eyes at the memory of watching the numbers grow as he tapped in the dreadful calculations: 313 tracts multiplied by 20 verses was 6,260 verses in all. And 500 times 6,260 yielded 3,130,000 verses to read. He'd silently read the first verse as quickly as he could without stumbling over it -- *Thus transitioned Gactimus* -- and timed it at 12 seconds. Twelve seconds times 3,130,000 was...more than 37 million seconds. And 37 million seconds, divided into nine-hour days, came out to...

"Four years, kid," Fanaso said quietly. "Four years, 56 days and seven hours. That's how long it took."

It should have been less than that by several months. First the kriffing bugs had to torment him, letting him read for an entire day before correcting him on some points of pronunciation and making him start over. At the end of the first week his vocal cords were so frayed that he couldn't even produce a rusty croak, leaving him in Triton Besh's infirmary for two days. That had convinced him of the wisdom of a slower pace and carefully spaced sips of distilled juice. Juice that, he'd once estimated, had required 33 days' worth of much-resented extra trips to the 'fresher. Then there were the scattering of days when he couldn't bear the thought of reading and sat numbly on his cot instead. And, of course, the three times he was assaulted by infuriated spacers.

"Weren't you in a guidebook, Shandy?" asked Devoris with a smirk.

"A Herglic one. *Strange Sights Along the Spaceways*. That started early in the third year. They used to come through in groups of five. A hundred an hour, some days. They stank."

"But they tipped you," Devoris said.

Fanaso frowned. Yes, a bejeweled Herglic merchant in the first group had tipped him, flipping a quarter-cred to him, then encouraging the other members of his tour to follow suit. The bugs had confiscated the tips over Fanaso's furious objections -- until Gallagane, on one of his periodic inspections, ordered that any tips Fanaso collected during his donation-service were his to keep. At which point Saman promptly charged him for

accumulated room and board, putting him even deeper in debt. Gallagane allowed that, but insisted that the truculent bartender set a schedule of rates, to remain in effect for the duration of Fanaso's devotion-service. Which had finally ceased on a day like any other on Triton Besh, except that on this particular day Fanaso switched off the amplifier and stumbled to the tithing-office to reserve a berth on the next liner back to Eriadu.

"Those tips added up, didn't they, Shandy?" Devoris asked, still grinning.

Fanaso nodded, glowering at the laughing smugglers.

"And the tracts? Tell the kid about the tracts."

Fanaso balled the tract up in his fist and flung it in the direction of Devoris, who caught it with a flick of the wrist.

"That's my favorite part," Devoris said. "Not only does Fanaso walk out of Triton Besh with two trunks full of creds from tips, but the bugs insist he take all 313 tracts with him. For further study, right, Shandy? And you almost tore them up in the umbilical, didn't you?"

"I was going to shred them," Shandy said. "But I was afraid that would violate something in the Rules of Law."

"What Shandy didn't know -- yet -- was that for an initiate to receive a tract, he has to demonstrate mastery of the previous ones in the saga. Tract One? You'll find dozens of them in any spaceport trash bin. But Tract One Hundred? Fanaso here is one of the few non-bugs who's ever seen a copy. And a set of all 313? Only nine are known to exist in the galaxy. One of them belongs to a Herglic collector on Sukkult -- who paid Shandy Fanaso a million credits for it. So Shandy was right -- he was going to the Triton moons to get rich. Right, Shandy?"

Fanaso nodded at the smugglers and the ship's boy. Paying off the backers of *Shandy's Pleasure Palace* had eaten up most of the money, of course, but there'd been enough left over to buy a share in the *One Two Many* and an escape into a new life -- one that would never take him near a Triton Moon.

"You got rich, Mr. Fanaso," Janzel Helot said in wonder. "So it was all worth it."

"I was rich for a week," Fanaso said. "And it wasn't worth it, kid. Not by a long shot. You think I'm wrong, go read that tract -- just that one kriffing tract -- 500 times and see if you don't change your mind. And you remember a few things, kid. First off, you're never as smart as you think. Any bright idea you get, odds are somebody already had it. And always, always read the fine print. Those details, kid, they can hide some pretty big dinkos."